

# Odyssey

**As Sally Montgomery has already said in these pages, W5 is just one element of the Odyssey project in Northern Ireland, the others being an indoor arena, an IMAX cinema and a central courtyard around which the facilities are located. The development of Odyssey as a whole has owed much to the private sector funding brought to the project by the Sheridan Group. Here Peter Holmes, Director of the Sheridan Group, explains the innovative financial planning that has made Odyssey possible, and why W5, as part of a bigger destination, is so much more than just another science centre.**

The Odyssey project in Belfast, one of the United Kingdom's Landmark Millennium Projects, is nearing its final stage of development. The scheduled opening of the commercial area in May, following the successful launches of the Arena and W5, the interactive science discovery centre, will complete a project which has brought together a strong public-private partnership to create a new style of leisure and entertainment destination.

Odyssey is sited on the east bank of the River Lagan, which flows through Belfast. Its waterfront has seen major transformations over the past hundred years, from being the heartland of a world player in shipbuilding (Harland and Wolff) to the point in the 1970s where the dock area had become almost deserted, with crumbling buildings and areas of dereliction.

The emergence of the Laganside Development Corporation and the associated redevelopment of the area bordering the river have played a vital role in transforming the

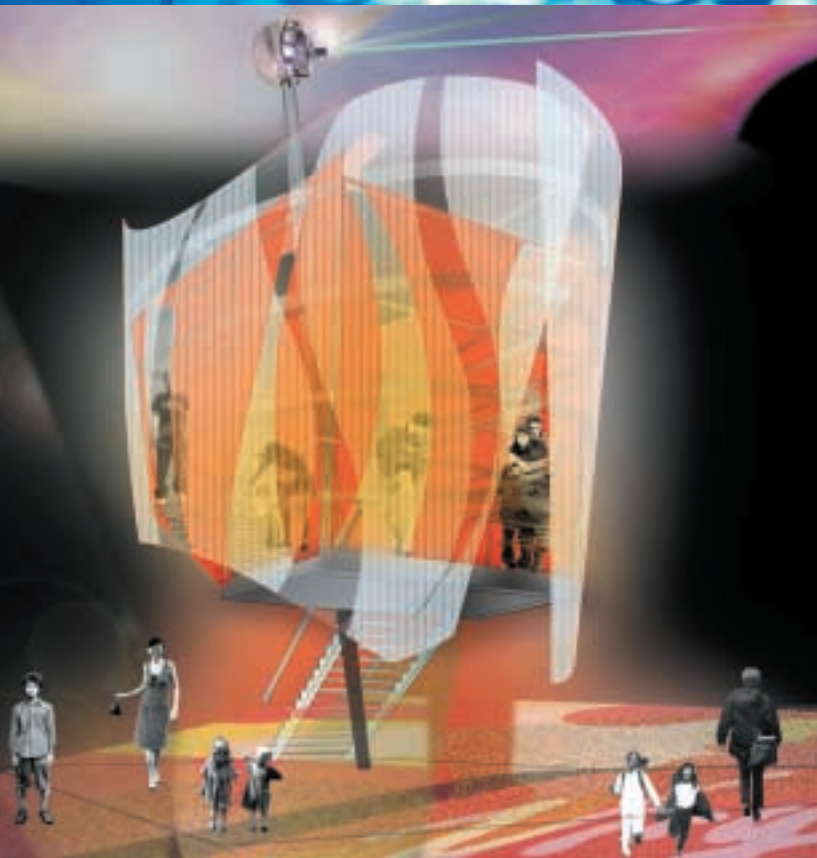
area. Employment in shipbuilding, the area's traditional industry, has slumped from some 25,000 to the point where it employs fewer than 1,000 workers. But development of the riverfront has provided offices, apartments and a new concert hall, and has created new opportunities, particularly in IT-related and creative industries, regenerating the economic and social environment. This commercial energy created a strong counterpoint to the terrorist violence still being regularly experienced by Northern Ireland up until the mid-1990s, and was indicative of the potential of the riverfront to be a revitalising force.

When it was announced that the Millennium Commission was to be established, making significant funds available for the development of major projects across the UK, there was clearly an opportunity for Northern Ireland to benefit from such resources. A number of projects emerged as potential candidates for such development, mainly looking to Belfast as their location, on one of several possible sites, including the

former gasworks then being detoxified by the City Council.

As elsewhere, a significant proportion of the total resource needed for projects (in the order of 50–55%) had to be raised from sources other than Millennium Commission. In Northern Ireland, with more limited local authority funding available than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, this put a particular onus on both Government and the private sector to find ways of matching the Commission's contribution. Fortunately, there was a positive response from the private sector, concerning a number of innovative projects.

Among these was a proposal from Peter Curistan, Chairman of the Sheridan Group, who had established a strong link with the then Ulster Museum, to develop a science centre alongside an IMAX Cinema. Discussions were held by the Sheridan Group with a number of interests, including the Northern Ireland Sports Council, which had initially proposed the creation of a multipurpose arena as a Millennium Project. Sheridan Group took



*The beacon of fire planned for Odyssey's Courtyard*  
Computer image courtesy of Rodney Fitch Design



*How the Courtyard's water beacon will look at night*  
Computer image courtesy of Rodney Fitch Design

the lead in funding the planning of an integrated project which would bring these elements together and exploit the synergy between them, enabling them to form a destination capable of engaging visitors for a significant period. The location proposed for the development of the project was a 23-acre site on the east bank of the Lagan, which at that time was being used as a scrapyard.

Crucial to the financial viability and ultimate success of the development was the creation of a commercial heart which would act as an attraction in its own right, but which would also serve to underwrite and cross-subsidise the operation of the science centre. Such a development would draw in the necessary private sector support, supplementing the public sector contribution and providing the match funding required by the Millennium Commission.

Ultimately, this mix was approved, and total baseline funding of £91 million was secured through contributions from the Millennium Commission (£45 million), the Government

(£16.9 million), the Sheridan Group (£16.9 million), Laganside Development Corporation (£9.8 million) and the Sports Council (£2.5 million).

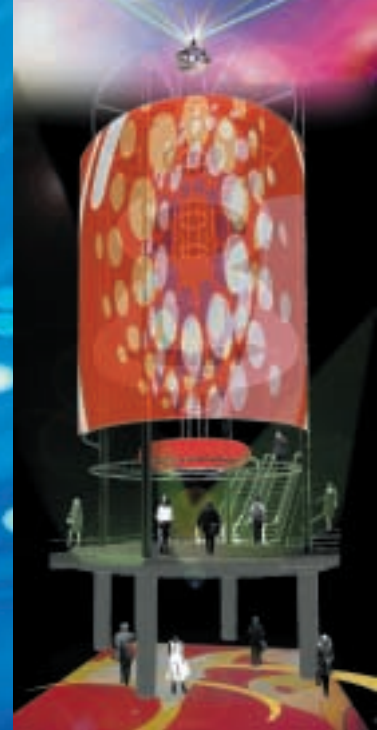
To ensure appropriate charge of the public sector financial input, the Odyssey Trust was established to oversee the implementation of the physical development.

#### **Growing the project**

The fundamental rationale for the project was to create in one unified destination a range of activities and opportunities for visitors, each of which would complement the other. Despite the optimism of the project team and the confidence of developers and funding stakeholders alike in the end result, it was recognised that, despite the welcome developments in the peace process, it would be some time before tourism would emerge as a strong complement to the Northern Ireland visitor base. Thus, Odyssey's various elements had to attract return visitation to ensure the planned footfall of approaching three million.

This put a considerable onus on the commercial element to provide a range of attractions which would match these criteria. The initial designs had envisaged a piazza-style environment with seats and plants, creating an outdoor environment but with the advantage of a tented, translucent roof, which would provide daylight and protection from an unpredictable climate. This fundamental concept of a space that could provide a meeting place, a cross-roads for the whole development, remained an integral part of the subsequent planning.

At an early stage of development, the main anchor tenant, Warner Village Cinemas, was confirmed. Warner's planned development of a 12-screen, 3,200-seat multiplex would occupy the upper level of the commercial area. With the confidence of such a strong anchor, together with the important contribution it would bring to overall range of opportunities, Sheridan sought and obtained planning permission to develop a mezzanine-level area, which would augment the potential



*The third of the Odyssey's Courtyard beacons, representing Air*  
Computer image courtesy of Rodney Fitch Design

for developing the tenant mix and promote a greater draw. This offered some 200,000 square feet of lettable space, with a further 50,000 square feet available in the central area.

At this time, we engaged Rodney Fitch Design to develop the concept of the area which came to be called the Courtyard. While accepting the initial concept of a civic-style meeting place and a streetscape, we felt that these, on their own, would be insufficient to act as a magnet for visitors during the day and at times when the arena would not be operating. Thus we embarked on our own journey with Rodney Fitch to create a lifestyle destination within Odyssey. This was aimed at creating an attractive environment where the whole family could gather before or after visiting the Arena, the IMAX, one of the Warner Village Cinemas or W5. Central to building this concept were the objectives of:

- ensuring progress through the space and avoiding 'dead' areas;
- increasing dwell-times;
- ensuring repeat visits.

The Rodney Fitch concept has been to create a safe, welcoming and exciting space, which is dynamic and entertaining – an ever-changing vista, which will match the time of day. Central to the concept are three massive beacons, one for each of the elements: fire, air and water. The beacons will employ state-of-the-art materials in their construction and innovative lighting and

sound to enhance their appeal. They will occupy cardinal points of the development, and are planned to include interactivity, allowing visitors to influence their appearance and to compose messages, which will be carried by LED boards.

In addition, the multimedia group Longcrest has developed an innovative multiscreen TV montage display, which will complement the visual images of the beacons. Together, they will offer a fascinating and compelling range of information, entertainment and advertising, adding significantly to the animation of the space.

The Courtyard offers great scope for live events, whether pure entertainment or sponsored events linked to product launches and so on. In all instances, the event will be supported by the presentation of the beacons and the ancillary lighting.

The groundbreaking mixture of lighting, sound, beacons, video screens and live events, together with web presence and radio broadcasting from the Courtyard, is being branded as Sheridan Live. This multimedia mix is designed to animate the space and to encourage local business and community involvement. We believe that this can be further developed, and can be translated to other venues.

#### **The proof of the pudding**

The opening season of the Arena, which is operated by a joint-venture SMG-Sheridan company, has seen sell-outs of many events staged to date, ranging from ice-hockey

matches to pop concerts to exhibitions.

Demand has been such that event duplication has had to be provided on several occasions. The opening of W5, meanwhile, has illustrated that a high-quality, innovative product will drive both interest and footfall. We now await in early May the opening of the Warner Village Cinemas and the first Hard Rock Cafe in Ireland, harbingers of the attractions that will progressively open as the commercial area springs to life.

Sheridan's contribution to the development now exceeds £25 million. Our goals of creating a world-class environment, attracting tenants who will provide world-class facilities, and ensuring that there are world-class levels of service are being vindicated by the interest generated worldwide in the concept. We are also encouraged by the enthusiasm being shown for the potential to create such developments in other localities. Thanks to years of careful planning, Odyssey is a very robust scheme with a long and fruitful future ahead. We are busy proving that a science centre can be more than a science centre, that a cinema can be more than a cinema, and that an arena can be more than an arena. Odyssey as a destination is greater than the sum of its very considerable parts. As a result, Odyssey is at the forefront of efforts to regenerate the leisure and entertainment market in Northern Ireland, and is playing an important role in building the country's reputation as a destination for tourism.